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RR RUEHDBU RUEHLN RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHAH #0059/01 0170946
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 170946Z JAN 07
FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8239
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1771
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0570
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0514
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0063
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0093
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 0062
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 0022
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 0015

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000059

SIPDIS

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY)
INFO SCA/PPD (VAN DE VATE), IIP/G/NEA-SA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PREL](#) [TX](#) [US](#)

SUBJECT: SCA DAS FEIGENBAUM VISIT REINFORCES U.S. COMMITMENT TO
EDUCATION, OPENNESS IN U.S.-TURKMENISTAN RELATIONSHIP

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SUMMARY

11. (U) Building on a three and a half hour meeting with Foreign Minister Meredov that included discussion of education, SCA Deputy Assistant Secretary Evan Feigenbaum sent a clear message to Turkmenistan officials of U.S. support for educational development in Turkmenistan, with a visit to a FLEX testing site outside the capital on February 13. He also reinforced to U.S. exchange programs alumni, in a roundtable discussion on February 12, the high priority the U.S. Government places on expanding bilateral engagement on education and development issues. DAS Feigenbaum further explored post's fruitful cultural outreach with the host government, with a tour of its first cultural preservation site. End Summary.

MEETING WITH ALUMNI OF USG PROGRAMS

12. (U) Twenty alumni of U.S. Government professional and academic exchange programs gathered for a lunch discussion with DAS Feigenbaum on February 12 at the Public Affairs Section. A mix of high school and university-aged young people and seasoned professionals, the alumni wanted to know about DAS Feigenbaum's meeting with Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov and the prospects for the U.S.-Turkmenistan relationship. Foremost on their minds was whether DAS Feigenbaum thought that the domestic policies of the Turkmenistan government would improve or worsen the education system and employment opportunities.

13. (U) Of those gathered, the younger alumni seemed to have the fewest prospects either for continuing education or jobs -- but still expressed great optimism for Turkmenistan's future. One UGRAD alumna has been trying since summer 2006 to gain readmission to her local university -- and pledged to continue trying. Three jobless FLEX students teach their peers English and debate and leadership skills at the American Center; although among the best educated young people in Turkmenistan -- and with highly developed English skills -- these young people have limited prospects for a university education in Turkmenistan. One FLEX alumna gathered the funds to apply to several U.S. universities and is hoping to obtain a scholarship so that she can attend.

14. (U) By contrast, an alumna of the International Visitors

Leadership Program on secondary education had jumpstarted several extracurricular youth activities at a local state school. A Fulbright alumnus and lawyer was called to be legal counsel to Akja Nurberdiyeva, the new Speaker of Parliament, and to the Mejlis (parliament). He is weighing this opportunity against the less personally and professionally risky possibility of conducting research in Estonia with an Estonian Fulbright alumnus.

15. (U) As DAS Feigenbaum explained to the alumni, his meeting with Meredov on January 10 -- the first substantive contact between the United States government and that of Turkmenistan since Niyazov's death -- was positive, wide-ranging, and opened the possibility for an expanded bilateral relationship. In a rare hint of skepticism from local youth, a UGRAD alumnus pressed DAS Feigenbaum to compare the U.S. interest in energy deals versus its commitment to educational development. He seemed pleasantly surprised when embassy Public Affairs staff revealed that they eagerly awaited the day when Public Affairs programming could blossom in Turkmenistan unhindered -- or at least with less obstruction than post currently experienced. At the end of the lunch, alumni expressed gratitude for being invited to speak with DAS Feigenbaum and seemed energized by the chance to hear what might be brewing in the minds of Turkmenistan's current leadership.

CENTRAL ASIAN ISLAM AND TRADITION MIX

16. (U) DAS Feigenbaum, the Acting Public Affairs Officer and PD LES joined the project manager of post's first Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation for a tour of sites in Anew, on February 12. Ruslan Muradov, a director of the Government of Turkmenistan's cultural sites preservation efforts and a specialist in Islamic architecture, first led the group to the excavation site of an ancient Turkmen settlement. U.S. archaeologist Fred Hiebert has been leading the excavation under sponsorship from National Geographic. In 2000 the site yielded a stone stamp dated to the

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seventh millennium BC with unidentified writing that is thought to pre-date the Chinese writing system. Findings from the site also indicated a possible connection between settlements in Anew and those of similar antiquity found along the Indus Valley in India.

17. (U) Muradov then led the group to the nearby ruins of the 15th-century Seit Jemmalatdin Mosque. The 1948 earthquake that killed nearly 90 percent of Ashgabat's population (including Niyazov's mother and siblings) also destroyed this mosque, which is still a major Turkmen and Sufi pilgrimage site. Post's 2001 Ambassador's Fund project strengthened the base of the ruins and restored a large tile mosaic of a dragon, which now lies in the National Museum in Ashgabat. As Muradov explained, early proponents of Islam incorporated symbols from local tradition or mythology into the mosque architecture, perhaps in order to make Islam more palatable to the local population -- and the dragon was a symbol of mythological significance to Turkmen. As Muradov spoke, local pilgrims filtered through the site, praying at the foot of a major Sufi saint located at the center of the mosque. In the past two years, the host government has sponsored construction of a building behind the site where pilgrims can prepare sacrificial meals, further supporting visits to the site.

FEIGENBAUM SENDS MESSAGE TO GOTX OFFICIALS ABOUT IMPORTANCE OF FLEX PROGRAM IN TEJEN

18. (U) DAS Feigenbaum and a small embassy delegation visited Tejen School Number 5 on January 13 to observe Round I retesting for the FLEX program and meet the Tejen participants of Round III (who passed Rounds I and II in December before post requested retesting at several sites). The Ahal Welayat Deputy Governor and several officials from his office, including the head regional representative of the Ministry of Education and school officials, greeted the delegation at the school and followed DAS Feigenbaum closely, conspicuously taking notes. The delegation and officials provided a dramatic welcome to participating students as all filed into the Round III and Round I testing rooms. DAS Feigenbaum

congratulated the five Round I testers and nine Round III interviewees, and noted that simply participating in the FLEX testing process was a courageous act. Continuing to speak to the students but directing his message to GOTX officials who had obstructed earlier rounds of testing, Feigenbaum stressed that the United States welcomed the participation of all groups in U.S. Government sponsored exchange programs -- regardless of gender, ethnicity and economic opportunity. Every student in Turkmenistan, he said, should have the same opportunity to participate in educational programs such as FLEX.

¶9. (U) In a subsequent meeting with the delegation, the Deputy Governor (Hakim) -- once the director of School Number 5 -- claimed that FLEX rolls were increasing annually (even though rolls in Tejen this year had dropped by over 50% because of government harassment of participants), and that local Peace Corps Volunteers were working with the school's teachers to create a physical education curriculum. In response to A/DCM's question about how Ahal Welayat might cope with an extension of the years of secondary schooling -- to 10 years -- the Deputy Hakim was evasive, stating that the welayat (province) had already identified teachers previously employed at state schools who could be rehired. He stated that the school curriculum would not be adjusted -- that only the hours of individual courses would be increased. The school, which serves up to 9th grade, currently enrolls 2500 students, but a new school will accommodate 1100. DAS Feigenbaum thanked the Deputy Hakim, stressing the importance of the FLEX program and similar exchange programs to the U.S.-Turkmenistan bilateral relationship. He emphasized the U.S. Government's desire for increased engagement in education, health, economics and security -- and that the rich cultural, educational and linguistic exchange embodied in the FLEX program could be of enormous benefit to both Turkmenistan and the United States.

COMMENT

¶10. (U) DAS Feigenbaum's interaction with USG Alumni and soon-to-be USG-sponsored exchange students demonstrated the positive outcomes of U.S.-sponsored educational programming and highlighted the need to expand such programs. Post outreach to alumni and current students provides hope and support for those eager to reach beyond

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the suffocating walls of Turkmenistan's current educational system. As news of FLEX testing harassment rises again from Turkmenabat, post welcomes this opportunity to emphasize to host government officials and to the public its firm commitment to educational development in Turkmenistan. End Comment.

¶11. (U) DAS Feigenbaum has cleared this message.

BRUSH